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ABSTRACT

Maintaining the status quo as well as the attitude toward cultural funding and development that it imposes on video are detrimental to the formation of a thriving video network, and also out of key with the present social and political situation in Britain. Independent video has some quite specific advantages as a medium for cultural production and distribution, especially in terms of the decentralization of control; however, it will be forced to mold itself into the restrictive models of independent film and community art, or to survive and develop as best it can in spite of the entrenched attitudes of the funding bodies, if there is not a fundamental shift in attitudes toward cultural production. As the British Film Institute takes over responsibility for some of the funding, it may begin to understand the issues at stake and appreciate the need for an "industrial development" perspective, as well as one centered on the artistic qualities of the individual product. Professional access workshops can tap funds from a whole range of sources and provide, in return, a service that is effective and educational. With the right support, the workshops can expand in spite of diminishing public resources. Most importantly, the access model is one in which control is shifted outward, toward the people who want to use the medium, a vital point in terms of the politics of representation. (CGD)

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DAVID STEWART

INDEPENDENT VIDEO IN BRITAIN

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INDEPENDENT VIDEO IN BRITAIN

Video activity, in all its commercial and non-commercial forms, is, of course, a relatively new development. Twenty years ago the technology for portable video recording, let alone editing, simply did not exist. Within the arts and independent film world the arrival of video has presented new challenges and problems. As with any new cultural form non-commercial and grant-aided video has had to fight for a place within the existing funding structures, and for recognition amongst those who hold the purse-strings. The reaction has been either to regard video as something of an oddity, an imposter making extra calls on a shrinking pot of money, or to attempt to make it fit into the old funding models; generally speaking those of independent film and of community art. Video has been treated, on the one hand, as a cheap form of production for independent film-makers and artists, and, on the other hand, as a very cheap tool for the community activist. It would be true to say that many video workers have collaborated in this distortion of what, I would argue, is potentially a genuinely new cultural form, with new forms of cultural intervention, simply in order to obtain the money. This much is understandable, both on the part of the video-makers themselves, and of those responsible for the sharing out of grant-aid; it is far more comfortable to maintain the status-quo than it is to undergo a significant change of policy and thinking. Yet I would argue that the status-quo, and the attitude to cultural funding and development it imposes on video, is utterly detrimental to the formation of a thriving independent video network, and quite out of key with the present social and political situation. So rather than regard video as the oddity, I would like to turn the tables; and use the situation surrounding video as a way of criticising some of the received opinions about independent practice and about the funding of independent work.

The central problem is that neither the independent film-maker model or the community art model can come to grips with the need for wider access to cultural production. Here video has some quite specific advantages as a medium for cultural production and distribution, especially in terms of the decentralisation of control. Video exhibition, for example, and the means of distribution, are relatively inexpensive. A television monitor and video player are cheap enough to be bought or hired by individuals for personal use; similarly video-cassette distribution uses mass-produced blank cassettes and relatively inexpensive duplication methods. The economics of video distribution and exhibition are weighted, then, towards the possiblility of decentralisation. Compare this with television, cable or cinema, where the costs of distribution and exhibition, let alone the regulations which surround them, militate against decentralised programming control. A video, on the other hand, can be played when and where you want, and programming is controlled by the user.

Production, too, offers increased accessibility and control. The possiblity of instant playback means that both producers and subjects can assess work in progress easily and simply. In terms of developing skills amongst untrained users of video instant playback has distinct advantages over film and even photography; work can be judged and repeated attempts made. Even experienced users can benefit from the confidence of knowing that a shot can be replayed and assessed; which means that they can be more adventurous without taking too much risk. For training purposes the fact that stock can be re-used means that participants can have adequate hands-on experience without great expense.

Of course the relative ease-of-use of video - the simplicity of the basic handling of the equipment - has its drawbacks. One of these is the assumption that the skills of programme production are also easy and straight-forward. This assumption is compounded by the flow of mainstream television programmes; the unobtrusive nature of their techniques and their assumed 'naturalness' suggests that the same can be done on video. Unfortunately, or fortunately (from a political point of view), pale imitations of television programmes on video generally do not work. Before the medium can become really effective users need to acquire not only technical skills beyond those of simply operating the camera and recorder (skills like lighting and sound), but also the 'intellectual' skills of programme organisation and scripting. But this is not at all a bad thing. Tackled in the right way, the initial problem over producing something which doesn't look like incompetent television can be turned into an advantage: it is a way into discussing how images, techniques and conventions work - how meaning is produced.

But perhaps the most crucial characteristic of video is that it is possible, despite the relative expense of shooting and editing facilities, to own the complete means of production. This provides the economic basis for democratisation of the medium, the provision of access on a wide scale, since it means that complete production set-ups can be established right across the country.

These fundamental differences in the way in which video can be produced and distributed should point to new structures for organisation and support. In fact many of the overt specificities of the medium are seized upon and taken advantage of, without the implications being thought through. In many respects video is seen as something different, but the differences are caricatured, made simple where in fact they are complex. For example, the common assertion that video is cheap, or rather that it is cheaper than film, is true only in a simplistic sense: shooting an hour of VHS is cheaper, minute for minute, than shooting Super 8; if you take account only of the direct costs. However this view does not account for the expenditure tied up in the capital cost of the equipment, which depreciates in much the same way as a car, or of the revenue expenditure required to maintain and service the equipment. Add to this the costs of personnel, and the margin between film and

video quickly narrows. Even more so when it comes to editing; video editing equipment is very expensive, costing over £6,000 for the most basic of VHS suites, more for low band U-matic, and far more for broadcast. It all adds up to considerable expense, which is barely offset by the difference between the costs of video stock and that of stock and developing and printing for film.

The myths about the 'cheapness' of video are accentuated through the funding structures, In much of the community arts field, for instance, it is a good deal easier to obtain capital funding than revenue. Equipment is purchased on one-off payments, and the people who use it do not have to give great consideration to its real cost, day by day, until it has to be replaced. Because of this the only apparent costs of using video are the immediate ones; video seems to be cheap, when in fact it is not.

If we compare this situation with a commercial video facility, the reality of video economics becomes more apparent. It is now standard commercial practice to depreciate video equipment over three years; in other words a video camera which costs £6,000 to buy will be worth nothing in three years time - an annual expenditure of £2,000. This rapid depreciation is intended to take account of the speed with which video equipment is superceded by new and more sophisticated models, and of the damage and wear that constant use inflicts upon it. Added to this annual sum is the cost of maintenance, often on a service contract costing, say, 10% per year of the purchase price (i.e. £600); and the cost of the loan used to buy the equipment (which may be another 15% per year). All in all, the camera alone, before you have even started to use it, may be costing as much as £3000 a year, or about £60 a week. In a commercial company this figure would have to be generated from earned income, through hiring out the camera, so that when the three years is up the camera is fully paid for, and another can be bought. Generally, of course, the hirings are budgetted to create a surplus, which is used to cover personnel expenses and to generate profit.

This economic costing of facilities may not be of great importance to an educational establishment, say, which can obtain new equipment when it is needed; but they are considerable significance to the budgetting of a video workshop, forinstance, if it has to replace equipment out its own funds. In the event, much of the initial funding of video workshops has followed the 'educational' or 'community arts' model rather than the commercial one; equipment is purchased with one-off capital grants and insufficient income is generated to cover the real cost of replacement and maintenance. When the equipment fails, and needs to be replaced, there is no alternative but to go to the same funding bodies for further capital grants. But by this stage the replacement equipment is more expensive, or the technology has progressed, and the funding body has more demands on its (usually) shrinking resources.

The effect of this is twofold. Firstly it means that video workshops that depend on finance from funding bodies for a regular top-up of equipment, as well as revenue funding for premises and labour, are profoundly insecure. Many have in fact disappeared, or are in severe financial crisis, already. Secondly, and more insidiously, it means that the funding bodies remain in a position of patronage, where they maintain control over who and what is funded. These workshops, far from being independent, are in fact utterly dependent on their sources of grant-aid finance. Many groups have thrown themselves into this trap by rising to the lure of a capital grant that has strings attached. For many funding bodies do not like to see their equipment being used to raise money: the view is that, since the equipment was given to the group 'for free', it should be passed on to the public for free. The video group is restricted from developing by the very people who give it support; and all to often the workers accede to this restriction because it seems easier to fit in with the prevailing funding model.

This situation, I would argue, is, in a sense, a reproduction of the older relation between funding sources and independent film-makers. Here the economics were different - film-makers had to find revenue funding to cover the laboratory costs for processing and printing - but the result was the same. The independent film-maker, or group, needed to return year after year to the same funding sources in order to finance production. The net result was that the people controlling the sources for independent production actually controlled independent production as a whole. Without going commercial, and selling one's product in a totally different way, there was no other means of survival.

This is where video, with its radically different economics of production and distribution, can offer a new model of independence. Whereas the world of independent film was closed-off, with a built-in structure of elitism arising from the need of the film-maker and funding decision-makers to 'talk the same language'(how often were they the same people anyway?), video can be much more open. Capital costs, although great, can be spread over several years, and revenue collected while the equipment is being used. Because expenditure does not go to outside institutions, like film labs, the group only needs to cover the real costs and no more. With a non-profit-making system like this anyone who needs to use equipment can, in effect, buy a small time-share. A relatively low payment can buy the right to exactly the number of days use needed and no more. Yet it is this very 'openness', the possibility of real access to production, which generates so much suspicion in the intellectual thinking which still dominates the funding of independent work. Surely, it is argued, access means an increase in quantity - and the higher the quantity, the lower the quality. In the old models of arts funding such an equation may make sense; it may be better to fund one talented individual than ten mediocre ones. But does it have any relevance to the world of mass communication? Is that notion of quality, of the 'good product' any use any more? Or do the suspicions of video access stem

more from the threat of diminished control over the product than from a genuine concern over the benefits of the medium?

The simple availability of production equipment and facilitators should not, however, be the central concern. What about the political implications of access production? What is its cultural significance? Which brings us to the crucial question of audience. What are the audiences for independent video? How are they constituted? The important distinction here is that, with video, the audience can, to a large extent, be determined by the producers. Because video playback is so diversely and extensively available, the contexts of viewing can be varied according to individual needs. Specific audiences can be pinpointed and targetted, and means of distribution set up in advance to ensure that they are reached. This specification of an audience can have a significant effect on the way a tape is produced.

Once again it is possible to make a useful comparison between the present funding of independent work and a commercial model. Within arts funding assessment of a potential project is still based on the innovative qualities of the film or video; the way it subverts the conventional uses of the medium. Questions about the perceived audience are secondary to the intentions of the maker; the film is conceived in terms of 'expression' by the maker rather than 'reception' or understanding by the spectator. Indeed, all too often the dislocation of the audience is justified through an assertion that it is all about the disruption of the relationship between spectator and film. This may sound fine as a theory, but does it work in practice? At the other end of the scale would be the management video. Here the audience is of paramount importance, for these commercial tapes are all about having an immediate effect on the spectator - motivating, changing behaviour, selling. The audience comes first, and the personal statements of the tape-maker are irrelevant. Commercial videos are judged on their effectiveness, and the results can usually be measured or perceived. What is more, they are usually structured into a wider strategy; in training, for instance, they would be part of a training programme, backed up with teaching and study materials. The purpose of the tape would be carefully defined, and the expenditure on it assessed. In other words, whereas the independent film is judged simply as an 'object', the commercial production is judged by its usefullness.

The problem with these comparisons is that they can seem to present an unresolveable dichotomy; between the commercial economic model on the one hand, and arts patronage on the other; between the promotion of film and video as an art, on the one hand, and as an unproblematic communication tool on the other. However the apparent dichotomy is one created more by entrenched attitudes than by social and economic reality. Many potential video producers reject the idea of using video as an instrumental tool, but would nevertheless like to communicate through it. For these people video access offers a solution; but it has to be

access to decent production equipment and proper assistance and training; in other words there is a political imperative to ensure that effective independent production is available to everyone who needs to represent themselves. The artists' film and video model won't work, becuase it gives access to so few. The traditional community video model won't work because the quality of production, the ability to represent adequately, is not there. In a society where information and communication is being increasingly withdrawn from democratic control, the need for access to the means of audio-visual production and distribution becomes more urgent. The struggle over representation has to be conducted on a wider scale than the few independent producers who can lay their hands on arts funding, or a few community workers struggling with inadequate resources.

So is the development of a more democratic structure and network of video production and distribution the responsibility of the funding bodies like the British Film Institute, Channel 4, the Regional Arts Associations, the Arts Council of Great Britain. In the past a familiar argument has emerged to the effect that video access is essentially a community resource, and therefore the responsibility of the Local Authorities. And indeed, in the early days of community video, video activists unwittingly strengthened these arguments by emphasising the group and individual development sides of their work; the benefits to the people involved in the process rather than the qualities of the product (of which there were, admittedly, few). The funding bodies for film, to their discredit, failed to see that community video is not the same as properly developed video access, which has at its heart a belief in the decentralisation of video production and distribution. The potential offered by video is that you can have both access - the availability of facilities and expertise - and production. As a means of beginning to undermine the mis-representations of commercial film and television, the possiblities were enormous. Yet the funding bodies, with their dedication to the production of individual films of 'quality', have remained, for the most part, impervious to change. Video access comes a long way down their list of priorities.

Even the much acclaimed Workshop Declaration, which has enabled certain 'franchised' groups to have work transmitted on Channel 4 without the usual union restrictions, and which might have offered an avenue for a genuinely new approach to cultural production, has in fact reflected the same old system, on a grander scale. The majority of the franchised groups have little or no access provision; they are more like committed film-makers working to commission. In some cases there seems little to distinguish them from an ordinary independent production company working for Channel 4 or the BFI Production Board. Ironically, although the Declaration is supposed to be restricted to those who have a commitment to educational activities, those groups which concentrate on access to equipment and production skills are often excluded. Why? Because it is assumed that they will not be able to produce broadcastable programmes, so they don't

need a franchise. They don't need a franchise, so they don't need the money to produce. Catch 22. It might be suggested that this vicious circle of enforced poverty is quite simply a way of keeping the non-professionals, and very often the unrepresented, out of production.

Fortunately, not everything rests in the hands of those funding bodies, for video workshops do exist and produce, often with minimal funding from Regional Arts Associations and/or their Local Authorities; and it is very often possible for individuals and groups with a need to communicate to do so with the help of other sources of funding, through their local workshops. Most of the development has been made possible by moving away from the old models of arts funding; the necessity of surviving without patronage is causing more and more groups to look for alternative methods of survival and development.

On the economic level more and more groups are realising the need to budget for equipment and its maintenance on a annual basis, making sure that there is enough revenue in each year to pay for the real costs of their facilities. This usually means charging enough for the hire of facilities to cover these basic costs, and in some cases enough to pay for wages as well. Generally speaking such hire rates are well below the commercial standard, and there are usually restrictions on the type of user able to hire equipment for subsidised rates. Commonly, the equipment is hired out to commercial users at commercial rates when it is not otherwise required. Such workshops buy equipment when there is sufficient local demand to justify the purchase; in other words at the moment when, and not before, the facility is needed. Rather than setting up a resource centre out of the blue, more commercially minded projects build up as their clientele builds up. They are dedicated to training and improving the skills and abilities of their users because, quite simply, that is how they survive. Such workshops have to be responsive to local needs, but they also have to take a developmental view; they need to promote the use of video, or to use cruder commercial terms, to market and sell. That, however, is not just out of financial exigency; it is a question too of reaching wider audiences, of increasing participation, and of building awareness of a viable alternative to mainstream representation.

The shift onto a more commercial footing has had several effects. It has meant that these groups are in the position of being able to buy equipment, on a three to five year lease, without having to beg money from anyone: they are free from the constraints of having to justify the expenditure to funding bodies who may not approve of their plans. It has lead to a more professional approach to notions of video access: if you are asking people to pay even small amounts for equipment use, the service has to be up to scratch. The equipment has to work, and you have to have the appropriate training services to match; on the other hand, you do have the revenue to provide these. Ironically, the equipment, far from being less accessible, because of the cost, it is more often available, because users make more efficient use

of it - again because of the cost.

But perhaps the most significant repercussion of this shift has been in terms of tape production. People coming to such a workshop wishing to make a tape are immediately presented with the need to make a realistic (though considerably less than commercial) budget. They have to consider what the tape is worth to them, what their audience is, how they are going to reach them, how they are going to recoup their expenditure. Not only does this encourage potential makers to consider the vital steps involved in production - deciding, for instance, what they need to learn to do; or how much professional assistance they might need - it also leads them into thinking about how the tape might be received, what it will mean to the audience. The need to raise some production funding involves them in the drafting of proposals, and perhaps the development of a script, to present to potential funders; all part of an educational process which is nevertheless directed at an end product. The need to produce effectively on low budgets means a careful consideration of the means of communication; the style and techniques used and the implications of using them. So the end product is something special; a tape produced on high quality facilities to a high standard, which is also the result of a real collaboration between professional workers and members of the public, and which, by its very nature, is oppositional in both form and production method to mainstream television.

This may sound utopian, and to an extent perhaps it is. For genuinely educational approaches to such a process must take time, and time means labour, and labour costs money. Access provision, if it is to be more than a less expensive version of commercial video facilities, has to be supported; and it is the educational element which needs most support because it is not an earner. Video workshops may be able to support the equipment base and training courses from earned income, because they are easy to cost and market; but the time and resources spent on education cannot be sold. Help, advice and time spent on collaborative projects has to be free, or the access philosophy is a waste of time. But the crucial difference here is that funding bodies are being asked to invest in a project which already has the means of survival; not to support one which would otherwise collapse. It is investment, in a real sense, because the money is spent directly on that aspect of the work which is their responsibility, the educational, and not on the basic maintenance of a public resource. One of the richest ironies is that funding bodies often fail to invest money in more self-sufficient projects because they are seen to be surviving. The real money continues to be sunk into projects which are failing to generate their own support, and which are therefore always on the verge of collapse. Survival for these groups is secured, but at the expense of the nationwide development of a significant, and alternative, cultural industry.

For video-workers, too, greater self-sufficiency presents new problems. It means engaging with notions of 'professionalism'

and of 'public service'. In the past many video activists have argued that to take on any of the professional practices of the mainstream means an acceptance of reactionary values; the conventions are a direct expression of an ideology. Either you ignore them altogether, and leave people to do their own thing (as in early community video), or you go out of your way to subvert and undercut mainstream conventions (as in art film or video-art). Both arguments have a certain intellectual purity, but then both also pay scant regard to the expectations of a potential audience. Community video tapes which reflect the non-interventionist process of 'giving people the camera and letting them get on with it' tend to mimic the conventions of the mainstream anyway, because that is what people expect television to be like. Beyond this they are usually long and tedious, mainly because the makers are unable to attain the craft of the original, through lack of both budget and the necessary skills. Artists' film and video, where the makers are generally highly aware of the conventions of the medium, can have the same effect by different means. The style is so subversive that the end-product alienates all but a few cognoscenti. Both the art and the community approaches can claim to be attacks on dominant representation - but how effective are they? Is the person who makes a community video which is no more than a poor version of television really getting access to a proper means of representation? Or is it, in the end, just a sop; a chance to feel the glamour of making your own programmes, without the real opportunity to communicate to other people? Or, in the case of the artist; does a tape or film genuinely have the power to subvert if its audience is limited to the people who go into galleries, if the wider audience can find no way into an understanding of the artefact?

Both strategies, it seems, have their justifications; but the arguments are somewhat precious. While it may be considered politically sound not to associate with the professional attitudes and conventions of the mainstream, there remains a pressing need for people to learn how to represent themselves. To do this adequately they need the equipment, but more importantly they need the professional guidance that enables them to control the results. That means providing everything that the commercial video facility provides and more; for access clients need to know not just how to make tapes conventionally, but also how to make them unconventionally. For the ability to choose a style or technique, to decide the form of a tape, is the only way in which the access client has real control over representation. Good access provision has a purpose - it enables people to communicate and to control their communication - but it is also inherently educational; it is about learning about the way the media create meaning. Theory and practice combined; the combination that everyone is looking for!

Yet to do this, and especially to create a nationwide network, will require significant shifts in mentality. It means a more professional approach on the part of independent workers, and it means a shift in notions of arts and community arts funding. One

of the major changes will be from the funding body as supporter of small projects, to the funding body as a minor shareholder in larger projects. In the past a £20,000 grant would simply be spent; the level of earned income would often be considerably lower than the grant-aid. Projects, under this philosophy, are given aid because they cannot succeed in the market-place. The sceptical might consider that they are supported because they aren't good enough not to be. Under a new developmental model the same £20,000 grant would be one part of a total turn-over of perhaps £80,000. The project would survive without it; however it gives them the economic leeway to undertake non-profit-making educational work. In this situation the funding body, though, is no longer in total control; that control is vested locally, in the project itself. Ultimately, the real economic shareholders are the people who use the equipment, for it is they, collectively, who pay for it.

At present the attainment of this economic security is not always unproblematic, even in projects which raise, through earned income, a high proportion of their annual turnover. Many are based within arts centres and other institutions. The salaries of the employees are paid by that institution, and the facilities owned not by the workers but by the whole organisation. With the arts world in financial crisis, even economically secure projects can find themselves subject to indiscriminate penalties and interference, by arts managements which are not always sympathetic to their aims, strategies or objectives. Safety, it would seem, lies in separate constitutions, such as those demanded, quite rightly, by the Workshop Declaration. Only in this way can decision-making and control be vested in the hands of the people with the relevant expertise - the people who run the project.

Further, there is the question of personnel. At present there is no career structure for video access workers, and little in the way of in-service training. If access provision across the country is to fulfill its potential there has to more to keep experienced workers from moving on to more reasonably paid jobs once they have done their stint. At the same time, those who are just beginning need real professional training, and the opportunity to up-date and develop their skills when necessary; this is especially important in the case of groups who are still underrepresented even in the independent sector, like black people and women. Furthermore, training has to encompass a wider range of skills, including administration, financial and budgeting skills, management, teaching, as well as keeping up with developments in video itself. The issue of personnel and their development has to be seen as a crucial, perhaps the most crucial, element in an investment plan for an alternative media industry.

Independent video is at a crossroads. Either it will continue as the poor cousin, forced to mould itself into the restrictive models of independent film and community art, or, more probably, to survive and develop as best it can in spite of the entrenched

attitudes of the funding bodies; or there will, at last, be a fundamental shift in attitudes to cultural production. Perhaps, with the British Film Institute taking over responsibility for some of the funding provided through the Greater London Council and the other Mets, that body will begin to understand the issues at stake, and appreciate the need for an 'industrial development' perspective as well as one centred on the artistic qualities of the individual product. Professional access workshops can tap funds from a whole range of sources - trade unions, local authorities, campaign and political groups - and provide in return a service that is effective and educational. With the right support they can expand in spite of diminishing public resources. Most importantly the access model is one in which control is shifted outwards, towards the people who want to use the medium; and in terms of the politics of representation, that is the vital point.